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DEPARTMENT FOR AF/W, OES/PCI
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SUBJECT: NIGERIA'S CROSS RIVER STATE PUTS THE ENVIRONMENT AT THE
CENTER OF ITS DEVELOPMENT AGENDA
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SUMMARY

1. (SBU) Regional Environment Officer (REO) and ESTH Officer visited Cross River State November 20-24 to assess wildlife and forest conservation efforts in the state. State officials reported that the state has embarked on an ambitious environment-centered development agenda with the primary objective of preserving the state's remaining forests and rich biodiversity through enhanced conservation, afforestation, and reforestation program. The State House of Assembly is considering a comprehensive environmental legislation that will provide the legal basis for enforcing conservation measures. It also plans to establish an eco-fund to finance environment-centered sustainable development projects in the state. The state, to spearhead these efforts, has invigorated its Forestry Commission by appointing a new CEO and a governing board composed of public, private, and civil society representatives. It has also sent a delegation to the Copenhagen Climate Change Conference to explore international carbon credit opportunities.
END SUMMARY.

CROSS RIVER SEES VALUE IN CONSERVING ITS RAINFORESTS

2. (SBU) Cross River State Commissioner for Environment Julius Okputu, Special Advisor on Conservation and Biodiversity Nzan Ogbe, and Permanent Secretary for Environment Charles Oduko met with REO and ESTH officer and outlined Cross River State Government's environment-centered development agenda. Okputu said preserving the environment and combating the effects of climate change are top priorities of the State Government. Nigeria has lost over 90 percent of its rainforests, and of the remaining 10 percent, more than half is found within Cross River State, according to the state officials. (NOTE: Cross River, with about 800,000 hectares of rainforests, is Nigeria's most heavily forested state, according to local officials. END NOTE). Furthermore, over 60 percent of Nigeria's endangered plant and animal species are found within these forests, which are under threat from illegal logging, unsustainable harvesting of non-timber forest products, and expanding agricultural practices.

3. (SBU) The State Government recognizes the ecological and economic value of its rainforests and is under pressure from both the federal government and civil society to protect them, according to Okputu. He said the core of the government's development agenda is maintaining and enhancing the Cross River National Park -- the largest rainforest in Nigeria and a national treasure -- through

enhanced anti-logging enforcement and a afforestation and reforestation project. Okputu said the state will channel more resources into the Cross River Forestry Commission, which manages the state's forest reserves.

14. (SBU) Okputu said that for conservation to work, the person at the forest-level must see real benefits from conservation efforts. He added that the state has recently introduced a free health care program for all children under five and pregnant women and wants to tie this benefit to its afforestation and reforestation project. He said the state plans to involve the community in the project by Qsaid the state plans to involve the community in the project by distributing free stocks of saplings and asking each family benefiting from the state's free health care program to plant and care for two trees per child.

CROSS RIVER ESTABLISHING AN ECO-FUND

15. (SBU) Okputu disclosed his government's plan to establish an eco-fund to support projects that enhance environmental stewardship throughout the state. The fund will draw its income from the state's share of the federal ecological fund, the United Nations Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD) program, a possible carbon financing regime that might emerge from the December 7-18 Copenhagen Climate Change Conference, a planed biodiversity offset program, and logging concessions in the future. Okputu reported that his state will be represented in Nigeria's 300-person strong delegation to the Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen. The eco-fund will be used to finance sustainable agricultural projects, micro-hydro projects and renewable energy, a

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model green city, and the greening of existing cities, according to Okputu.

16. (SBU) Okputu expressed displeasure at the current disbursement of the federal government's ecological fund, saying a disproportionate amount goes to drought and desertification control, which favors the northern states. (NOTE: Under the current formula, 60 percent of the fund goes for drought and desertification control, 25 percent for soil erosion and flood/gully control, 5 percent for pollution control, 5 percent for emergencies, and 5 percent for the administration of the fund. END NOTE). Okputu added that there is a collective push by the southern states to raise the 25 percent allocation for erosion and flood/gully control to at least 45 percent, arguing that the current allocation is insufficient given the challenges faced by southern states and should be calculated on the basis of need rather than on entitlement.

17. (SBU) Okputu is optimistic that the eco-fund will be established early next year and wants to do as much groundwork as possible to be ready for international carbon financing in the near future, which will be used to fund development projects. He said the state will institute a standardized development approach, where all projects will need to have a commitment to environmental protection and sustainable development principles by undergoing environmental assessment to determine any possible damage to biodiversity and any other environmental impact before approval. He added the state would require compensation for project-related loss to biodiversity and use the money to finance restoration efforts elsewhere. Okputu mentioned the lack of a central databank of environmental assets, funding, and human capacity as major challenges in realizing the state's development agenda. He said such a database is essential for effective forestry and biodiversity management and to apply for international carbon credits. He requested USG assistance in building such a system and the capacity of his agency.

WASTE MANAGEMENT A GROWING CONCERN

18. (SBU) Permanent Secretary for Environment Charles Oduko said

waste management is a significant problem in urban areas, especially in the capital city of Calabar. (NOTE: Calabar is perhaps one the cleanest cities in Nigeria and frequently earns praise as a model for other Nigerian cities to emulate. END NOTE). The city has no landfills, recycling or waste treatment facilities, although it has a functioning waste collection system. ESTH Officer explained the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Methane-to-Market (M2M) program, which helps convert landfill-generated methane gas into small scale energy for local use and promised to facilitate linkage with EPA's M2M program. Oduku said the state intends to privatize its waste collection and management services, convert existing dumpsites into landfills, and build recycling villages in partnership with the private sector.

A REFORMED FORESTRY COMMISSION

¶9. (SBU) Cross River State Forestry Commission Chairman Odigha Odigha and members of his governing board, composed of QOdigha and members of his governing board, composed of representatives from the public, private, and civil society sectors met with the visiting U.S. team and discussed their priorities. (NOTE: Chairman Odigha is a respected conservationist and environmental activist who worked in the state for local and international NGOs for a long time. END NOTE). Odigha said the state, as part of its forest conservation plan, has imposed a two-year moratorium on logging in January 2008 and is actively enforcing the ban through a recently established anti-logging task force. (NOTE: The state plans to extend the moratorium before it lapses in January 2008. END NOTE).

¶10. (SBU) Odigha said, with the moratorium on logging in effect and the resultant removal of revenue targets from logging concessions, his agency is now more focused on its core mission of promoting conservation. He also said the agency's board has approved elevating the Community Forest Management Unit within his agency to a department level, which he expects will result in more resources to encourage community-based forest conservation and wildlife management initiatives. He reported the Commission is spearheading an afforestation and reforestation project through an indigenous tree-planting campaign involving local communities. This is in addition to enhanced conservation of existing forests. The state --

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under its afforestation and reforestation project -- aims to increase its forest coverage from 800,000 hectares to one million hectares, according to Odigha. He reported that the Commission has started a tree nursery program and will soon start distributing stocks of saplings to communities throughout the state.

COMMENT

¶11. (SBU) Cross River State sees its depleted rainforests as precious resources that need to be preserved and enhanced for the benefit of current and future generations. The state has laid out an ambitious environment-centered development plan but lacks the resources and capacity to carry them out in a reasonable period of time. Prioritizing the various elements of the plan and taking an incremental approach is more likely to result in improved natural resource management and sustainable development. The state's plan could serve as a model for other Nigerian states.

¶12. (U) The REO in Accra cleared this cable.

SANDERS